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ROME OF VIRGIL

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The intellectual versatility of Cicero, the appealing charm of his personality, his copious eloquence and the sheer bulk and variety of his literary legacy pour such a glory about the closing years of the Republic that we forget his silences, and overlook the inadequacy of his writings as a picture of contemporary Rome. As we conjure up in fancy the image of this handsome Arpinate standing upon the brow of the old Rostra and facing a motionless multitude entranced by the abundance and smoothness of the numbers that flowed so effortlessly from his persuasive lips, how difficult to bear in mind that all the outward surroundings of that scene had long since grown quaint and archaic! When we think of him in the moment of peroration invoking the holiest memories and most precious sentiments of a brave and ancient populace, and raising a practiced hand in graceful gesture to the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus high above the listening throngs, how difficult to recall that the city about him was then as delapidated as his crowd was degraded, that of all the sacred edifices within the circle of those templed hills perhaps his temple of Jupiter alone was not in a condition upon that very day to tumble down! How easy to forget that with the exception of the Tabularium the buildings of the Forum had come down from the times when the red head of the elder Cato was a landmark among the crowds and the tribunals were fringed with veterans of the Punic Wars! The architectural grandeur of the city was of later date. It was the archaic Rome of Cicero that first met Virgil's eyes; only in later days did he behold the beginnings of the new Rome of Augustus.

In order to visualize the Rome of his student days we must dismiss from the fancy the memory of almost all the ruins that we

are accustomed to associate with the Forum, the city, and its surroundings. The three lonely columns of Castor's temple that stood up so bravely through all the centuries when the Forum was a cow pasture, the sturdy pillars of Saturn, too lofty to yield to the creeping earth and useless to the lime-burner, the battered arches of Titus and Septimius Severus, all the palaces of the Palatine and the ruddy ruins of the basilicas must be forgotten. From Juturna's fountain the white marble must be stripped. The area of the Forum must be cleared of all the monuments that we know unless the Lacus Curtius and the puteals. The temple of the sanctified Julius must revert to vacant space and the establishment of Vesta be imagined in a shabbiness of weathered tufa. The Regia, of which we cannot think without the recollection of the marble fasti that adorned its outer walls, was bare of this ornamentation for full eighteen years after the poet's arrival. In the very year of his coming he would have witnessed the demolition of the Tabernae Novae to make way for the Basilica Aemilia, built with Caesar's gold, but the elegance of the new erection must have stood for some years in strange contrast to the Tabernae Veteres across the square; they were a relic of the third century and must have seemed quaint. The truth is that Rome was not yet, architecturally, a metropolis. It might have compared favorably with Cremona but hardly with Antioch or Alexandria.

To glean some inkling of the real condition of things one must hum to himself the lines of Horace, composed some years later, about the tottering temples of the gods and the images begrimed with age and smoke:

Delicta maiorum immeritus lues,
Romane, donec templa refeceris
aedesque labentes deorum et
foeda nigro simulacra fumo. Odes iii, 6.

One must take that arid catalogue, the Monumentum Ancyranum, and peruse the long list of buildings carried out by Augustus and then read between the lines. Did he really restore some eighty temples?¹ Then in the days when Cicero was writing his *De Re*

¹ Mon. Ancy. 20.

Publica and Virgil was hearing his first lectures from the famous Epidius there must have been some eighty temples in a desperate condition of disrepair, fitter to enlighten an archaeologist than to awaken the admiration of a stranger, inspire the patriot or stimulate the pious. Take Castor's temple for example, situated where the densest traffic crossed the Forum, rendezvous of slaves and plebeians, rostra of the turbulent Clodius and his class, about which the squabbles of the mob had circled since the days of the Gracchi and longer, how much of the stucco would have been left upon it, if it was stuccoed, as has been thought? How would its shabby columns of an ancient pattern, perhaps Etruscan, perhaps square instead of round, how would they have appeared to a cultured Roman like Cicero, who had visited Miletus, Rhodes, and Athens?

The truth is that one must picture to himself in these last days of the Republic a congested and antiquated city with suburbs for the most part squalid. Prince and pauper, men of ancient birth and derelicts of society must have lived side by side, for did not Julius Caesar have his residence in the Subura and was not the Subura a byword for the high life and the low life of the capital? Above the Subura was a small, very small, fashionable quarter known as the Carinae or Ships' Bottoms, where Antony lived a few years later in Pompey's house. It was situated on the Oppian spur of the Esquiline. This spot had long been aristocratic. The patrician of Horace's seventh epistle of the first book, Lucius Marcius Philippus, had his home there and he was consul in 91 B. C. The Velian, once a royal quarter, was at this time given over to shops. On the Palatine lived Hortensius and Cicero, likewise close to the Forum. It would have been a great handicap to ambitious politicians to live at a greater distance. In the morning hours they kept open house and desired a numerous following to escort them to the Forum. Therefore the nearer the better. Hungry clients probably sought the nearest patron. In the Augustan age and later, with the decline in private entertainment and the increase of public doles, the city began to expand with rapidity.

It is true that men like the Luculli and Sallust, who had retired from public life with illicit wealth, had already withdrawn to a distance from the Forum and founded their gardens along the Pincian, but their extravagance could not have materially changed the aspect of the city. It was Maecenas himself who abolished hideousness by establishing his residence and gardens to the rear of the Esquiline on the very ground where friendless slaves, spendthrifts and criminals had mingled their dust since immemorial times. The situation was not far from the longest surviving stretch of the Servian wall, familiar to all tourists in the yards of the railway close by the Central Station, and from this district is also extant a stone of republican date bearing a praetor's edict forbidding the dumping of dead bodies or filth on the inside of a delimiting line.² Beyond the graveyard was the Roman Gallows Hill, a busy place, it may have been, in days when life was cheap. Virgil himself had a house in later days close by his patron's, but he rarely used it and may not have cared for his recollections of its former state, which one may learn in greater detail from the eighth satire of Horace's first book.

To complete the picture of Virgilian Rome one must take a swing around the Servian city well within the circle of the Aurelian Walls. The old Porta Capena would still span the Appian Way with the cold drops from the aqueduct threatening the bare neck of the passer-by, and just outside of it might have been seen the modest tomb of the Scipios with the bust of Ennius. That the poet should have neglected to pay a reverential visit to that shrine seems all but unthinkable, yet he could not have seen the Appian Way beyond the walls as we imagine it, for the originals of those ghastly ruins were with few exceptions of imperial date. The monument of Caecilia Metella he would have known in his later days perhaps, in all the freshness of recent masonry. It was Augustus, however, who built the first monumental tomb and the poet may have witnessed the first interment in it, the burial of the young Marcellus, whose untimely death is celebrated in the closing lines of the sixth Aeneid. This brings us to the Campus

² Richter, *Topographie*, p. 305.

Martius, the exploitation of which began with Pompey, who dedicated there his temple of Venus and theatre in the year preceding the arrival of the Virgil family in Rome. This was at that time the newest building in the city and the first permanent theatre, for the senatorial government, although neglectful and corrupt, clung hard to pious pretensions and insisted upon the law that banned the perpetuity of this immoral amusement. We may imagine the ambitious poet yielding to the temptation of going there with his student friends to enjoy his first sight of Ajax or Medea.

From the Pompeian theatre a short walk would have brought one to the great barracks-like voting pavilions of Julius, extending for a long way along the line of the modern Corso; Augustus used them for a zoo and exhibited there to the populace the first rhinoceros seen in Rome.³ But the Pantheon we must forget. It was post-Virgilian. In general the exploitation of this region as a monumental area was only in its beginnings.

The modern Trastevere, anciently known in its northern part as the *ager Vaticanus*, if the poet ever wandered in that direction, would have shown him potteries, brickyards, tanneries and the Jewish quarter, whose inhabitants Pompey had brought from the East. Near where St. Peter's now stands were established the gardens of the Domitian gens, soon to become notorious under Nero's regime, but we can only surmise that they were connected with the extensive suburban activity that went on under Augustus. Farther down the river, but within a mile from the lower gates, were the gardens of Caesar with Fortuna's temple and a great plebeian settlement. What sort of squalor prevailed there before the munificent dictator expended his Gallic gold to make of it a place of pleasure we cannot say, but the process falls squarely within the poet's days and he must have known the whole story. Since Horace was bound in this direction when he was endeavoring to shake off the bore of the fifth satire we may imagine that down the river was a suburban residential area of Augustan date; he mentions a villa and gardens by the Tiber in the third ode of the second book.

³ Suet. Aug. 43.

The civic administration in the last years of the republic was in harmony with the shabby appearance of the city itself and the hideous suburbs. Did Augustus select Agrippa, his most capable minister, to superintend the reconstruction of the sewers? Then the sewers must have been choked up, tumbling in, or entirely outgrown by expansion of population. Did Julius propose to regulate the course of the Tiber and did his adopted heir complete the work on a less ambitious scale? Then the unruly river must have been suffered under senatorial misgovernment to do unchecked its seasonal destruction. Did Augustus find it necessary to organize a fire department? Then fires must have been too frequent, as we know to have been the case, for did not Crassus, a prince among profiteers, make snug sums by buying in properties at bargain prices in the face of the flames?⁴ Were the aqueducts restored by Augustus? Then the populace must have suffered at times from lack of water. As a matter of fact, the patricians were tapping the aqueducts and stealing the water for their villas.

Nevertheless if the people were robbed of their water, if they were flooded out through neglect of the drains and embankments, if tier above tier of cheap apartment houses around the Quirinal, Capitol, Palatine and Aventine threatened fire, ruin and death continually, if the Forum and the city looked quaint and archaic, yet all was not squalor in Virgil's student days. The house of Pompey on the fashionable promontory of the Esquiline was adorned with beaks of captured ships like a public monument and men like the Luculli, fattened on the spoils of Asia, had establishments fit for Oriental monarchs. The truth is that Cicero, when he declares in his speech for Murena that the Romans loved magnificence in public life and economy in private, utters a pious and patriotic lie.⁵ The speaker himself, the retained counsel of a profiteering government, with his fifteen houses and his works of art collected for him by connoisseurs like Atticus, was a reckless spender who never learned the meaning of economy. It was his rich friends who began to bring colored marbles from distant quarries to support the burden of their porticoes or adorn the walls

⁴ Plut. Crassus 2.

⁵ Chap. 36 § 76.

of their villas. In public buildings such things were as yet almost unknown. Private economy was but a Roman shibboleth, private extravagance a Roman law.

In thinking of the Augustan age it is easy to overlook its great extent and the long interval between its beginning and its end. The men who composed the famous literary circle had already come together in the days when Antony was still a more imposing figure than the youthful heir of Julius, and much of the so-called Augustan literature was familiar to the world before the title of Augustus had been conferred. Virgil survived that event by only eight years while the princeps survived the poet by no less than thirty three. It is likewise easy to forget that the Augustan age of architecture, if we may so speak, falls somewhat later than the Augustan age of literature. Not until after the victory of Actium and the seizure of Cleopatra's treasure and revenues was the new ruler in a position financially to undertake rebuildings and improvements on a stupendous scale. The temple of the sanctified Julius he had built out of his private purse, no doubt, and the beautiful establishment of Apollo upon the Palatine he may have so begun, but the great majority of his undertakings necessarily dated from the years of his middle age. It follows that when the author of the unfinished epic passed forever from the scene the external grandeur of the eternal city was yet in the making, although even in the condition of incompleteness it must have seemed superb by comparison with the archaic Italic town of the style of the third century that first had met his eyes in the year of his arrival.⁶

⁶ Platner's *Topography and Monuments of Ancient Rome* may be consulted for dates and details of buildings mentioned.